

SPORTS

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 30, 2023 | journalstar.com/sports | PAGE C3



VOLLEYBALL WEDNESDAY

Omaha at No. 4 Nebraska, 7 p.m. | TV: BTN. | Radio: 107.3

Volleyball Day doubles as reunion

Huskers from all eras returning for event

EVAN BLAND
Omaha World-Herald

Step by step. Row by row. Karen Schonewise can't wait to see who she might meet on the way to her seat.

Schonewise has been to reunions before. She's still remembered for her exploits as Karen Dahlgren — a two-time All-America middle blocker — who starred on Nebraska volleyball's first team ever to reach the national title match in 1986. History has helped keep that group close through the years.

But there are so many others she hasn't caught up with much since their old Husker sport went and became a big deal. Like middle blocker Annie Adamczak — now Adamczak-Glavan — whose All-America senior year came in 1985. Or outside hitter Julie Hermann, whose All-Big Eight career ended in 1984.

A funny thing happened as the years went by and the sell-out streak — beginning at the 4,030-seat NU Coliseum in 2001 and enduring at the Devaney Sports Center that holds 8,000-plus — snowballed. When a specific team was being honored at a match, space became tight for former players to even bring their families with them. Anything more ambitious didn't seem possible.

That changes Wednesday. For upwards of 100 former Huskers, Volleyball Day in Nebraska will double as an unprecedented grand assembly of program luminaries.

"Never do we all get to come back," said Schonewise, who will make the trip from Kansas. "This is the first time to my knowledge that everyone has the opportunity to come back. It's going to be so much fun to see people we've played with and see other players through the years."

In the northernmost patch of lower East Stadium, Section 1 will hold a crowd of former All-Americans, national champions and retired jerseys spanning five decades. Who all will make it? The mystery is half the fun of ascending those concrete steps Wednesday evening.

Nancy (Meendering) Metcalf will be part of the all-eras lineup on hand. Life is different these days for the former three-time All-America hitter whose NU time ended in 2001 and was followed by a 13-year pro career. A stay-at-home mother of three living in Lincoln, her recent return to volleyball has been as a volunteer coach for her 8-year-old daughter's team.

Holding a match inside Memorial Stadium? It might be the

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JUSTIN WAN PHOTOS, JOURNAL STAR

Scott Ryan of Nebraska Sign Co. walks past the volleyball court as workers set up for Volleyball Day in Nebraska on Tuesday at Memorial Stadium.

Making history

Huskers looking forward to 'once-in-a-lifetime' match

BRENT C. WAGNER
Lincoln Journal Star

"It's very special actually being able to be someone who is going to play in that match that will probably hold the (attendance) record until we get to tell our daughters that we hold that record." — Merritt Beason on June 15.

It was two months away, but that quote from Nebraska volleyball player Merritt Beason put in perspective the magnitude of what was coming with the Huskers' outdoor volleyball match in a football stadium.

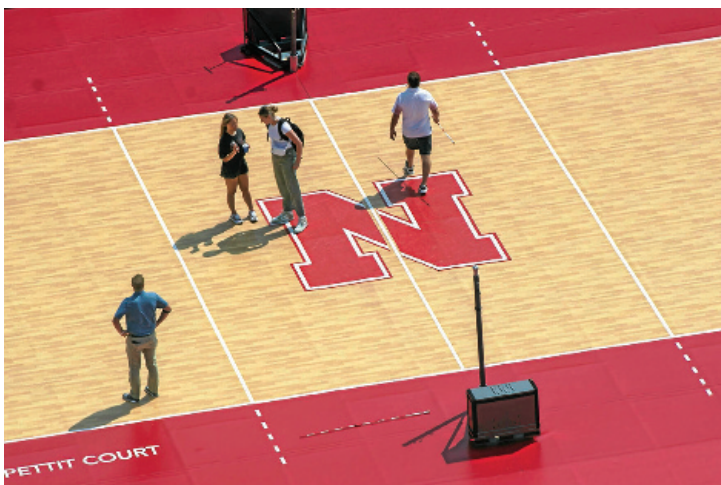
Years from now, Beason may be able to tell her children that she played in a volleyball match that 90,000 people wanted to be at.

Mom was down there on that court.

Six months after it was announced, Volleyball Day in Nebraska is here. On Wednesday, Nebraska plays Omaha at 7 p.m. on a court built on top of the football field at Memorial Stadium.

For you, is there something similar to Beason's quote that puts the stadium match in perspective? Or in the past few days, as the photos of the stadium started to hit social media, made you say, "This is insane?"

It's wild to think that for some



A look at the volleyball court at Memorial Stadium on Tuesday. Workers were busy preparing for the event, scheduled for Wednesday night in Lincoln.

people their first time in Memorial Stadium will be for a volleyball match, not a football game.

Maybe it is realizing that the attendance for this volleyball match will be greater than the 72,423 spectators for the men's college basketball national championship game at NRG Stadium in Houston last season.

Nebraska will top that — for a regular-season match against an unranked team on a hot day in August.

Of course, some people go to the basketball championship game at a football stadium to be a part of something memorable, even if they have to watch some of the game on the big screen.

On Wednesday, the view of the court should be OK from most of the seats — you'll feel like you

actually saw Lexi Rodriguez's diving dig.

This will be one of the largest crowds ever for a women's sporting event.

The American record attendance for a women's sporting event is 90,185 for the USA vs. China FIFA World Cup final in 1999 at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, California. That was at the end of a long tournament in the most populated state in the United States for the most popular sport in the world.

This is college volleyball in the Midwest.

The world record attendance for a women's sporting event is 91,648 — also for a soccer match, in Spain.

For sure, it would be the largest crowd for a women's volleyball match, topping the current

mark of 18,755 when Nebraska and Wisconsin played in the 2021 national championship match in Columbus, Ohio.

In order to count as an official NCAA volleyball record, the attendance must be counted at the conclusion of the second set of the Huskers' match.

Still, we'll have to see how many of the people who purchased up to 10 tickets use them all, and how many of the seats on the secondary ticket markets go unclaimed. And do the college students show up — and stay?

The attendance might be able to reach 92,000. There will be 3,000 event staff and about 350 media.

What a moment it will be for women's sports, and the players. Even when Nebraska plays in front of 8,000 spectators at Devaney Sports Center, you wonder what that must be like for the players' families, who remember some high school matches with maybe 400 people there.

For this match, they'll be sitting in the last row of a football stadium.

Please see **VOLLEYBALL**, Page C5

LOOK: To see more photos of Memorial Stadium's transformation into a volleyball venue, point your smartphone camera at the QR code, then tap the link. **NEWSVU**

Huskers don't want stadium practice to end

BRENT C. WAGNER
Lincoln Journal Star

At 8:20 p.m. Tuesday, coach John Cook told the players on the Nebraska volleyball team that practice was over.

Several players begged for five more minutes.

When you are playing the sport you love — on a 78-degree night under the lights of Memorial Stadium as music plays — you don't want it to end.

Thankfully, the Huskers will be back on Wednesday for a 7 p.m. regular-season outdoor match against Omaha.

Tuesday evening was ideal for Nebraska's 2½ hour practice, with the wind down from what it had been earlier in the day.

Before practice, the players did a short Tunnel Walk practice to get the timing down. Cook was with the team during the Tunnel Walk, first at the front before letting the players go ahead.

A few of the players came out



JUSTIN WAN, JOURNAL STAR

Nebraska's Bekka Allick reaches for the ball during a team practice Tuesday at Memorial Stadium.

with sunglasses but quickly realized they wouldn't be needed with most of the stadium already out of the sun.

Once the team got into some hitting drills, assistant coach Jaylen Reyes told the players to "play the wind."

Country music artist Scotty McCreery watched the last part of Nebraska's practice. He'll play a concert after the Huskers' match.

Earlier in the day, Wayne State players came out about 30 minutes before practice, many taking videos and photos of the stadium.

Ready to adjust

The massive stadium may be a larger adjustment than the heat or wind.

"The wind forecast sounds really good," said Cook, likely the first volleyball coach to say that during a news conference.

Depth perception may be a challenge.

"You have sky, and we're used to having ceiling," Cook said.

The court is on top of an elevated stage. Cook has no concerns about the playing surface.

"It feels really solid. It's really good," he said. "They did a great job designing it."

Big Ten Network planning big production

Nebraska's match will be on Big Ten Network, with Connor Onion, Emily Ehman and Larry Puntene (sideline reporter).

There will also be a pregame show hosted by Puntene and Eh-

man. There will be several interviews with former Huskers during the broadcast.

Postmatch concert

McCreery's 75-minute concert is scheduled to begin about 15 minutes after the match ends. Husker sophomore Bekka Allick plans to return to the court to watch.

"We're going to soak it in," Allick said. "We got a country concert. I've been thinking about bringing my boots. They said that they'll let us sit on the court, so we'll have front-row seats, basically."

Exhibition match

The undercard features Nebraska-Kearney taking on longtime rival Wayne State in a best-of-three exhibition match at 4:30 p.m. The reason for it being an exhibition is Wednesday's date falls before the NCAA Division II regular season begins.

Reunion

From C3

only thing that could bring so many familiar names — if not faces — together all at once.

“It’s really neat to see because I know there are several coming from a pretty great distance to be part of it,” Metcalf said. “It gives some of the players who have played over different decades a chance to mix it up with players from other times and just get to know each other. It makes it like, ‘We’re from Nebraska volleyball. We represent the entirety of the history of the sport here.’”

Not everyone can be on hand. Nebraska’s Olympic champions — Jordan Larson, Kelsey (Robinson) Cook and Justin Wong-Orantes — will be with the United States women’s national team at a tournament in Canada.

Christy Johnson-Lynch will be checking in from afar. The starting Husker setter for the 1995 national title team is also the 19th-year Iowa State head coach who will be preparing to board a plane Thursday morning with the Cyclones for a weekend tournament in Phoenix.

The 49-year-old supposes she’ll indulge in a few throwback moments before bedtime. She heard Omaha Skutt coach Renee Saunders — a freshman hitter on that ’95 squad — rescheduled a flight to be able to attend. One decorated setter who preceded her, Lori Endicott (1985-88), is coming back. Another, Val (Novak) Warrior (1987-90), might be too. She wonders about Fiona (Nepo) Fonoti (1995-98), a three-time All-America setter now an assistant coach at Kansas State.

If Johnson-Lynch’s notifications blow up, they’ll probably be from a pair of former outside weapons of hers in Kate (Crnich) Riggins and Lisa (Reitsma) Rautenberg.

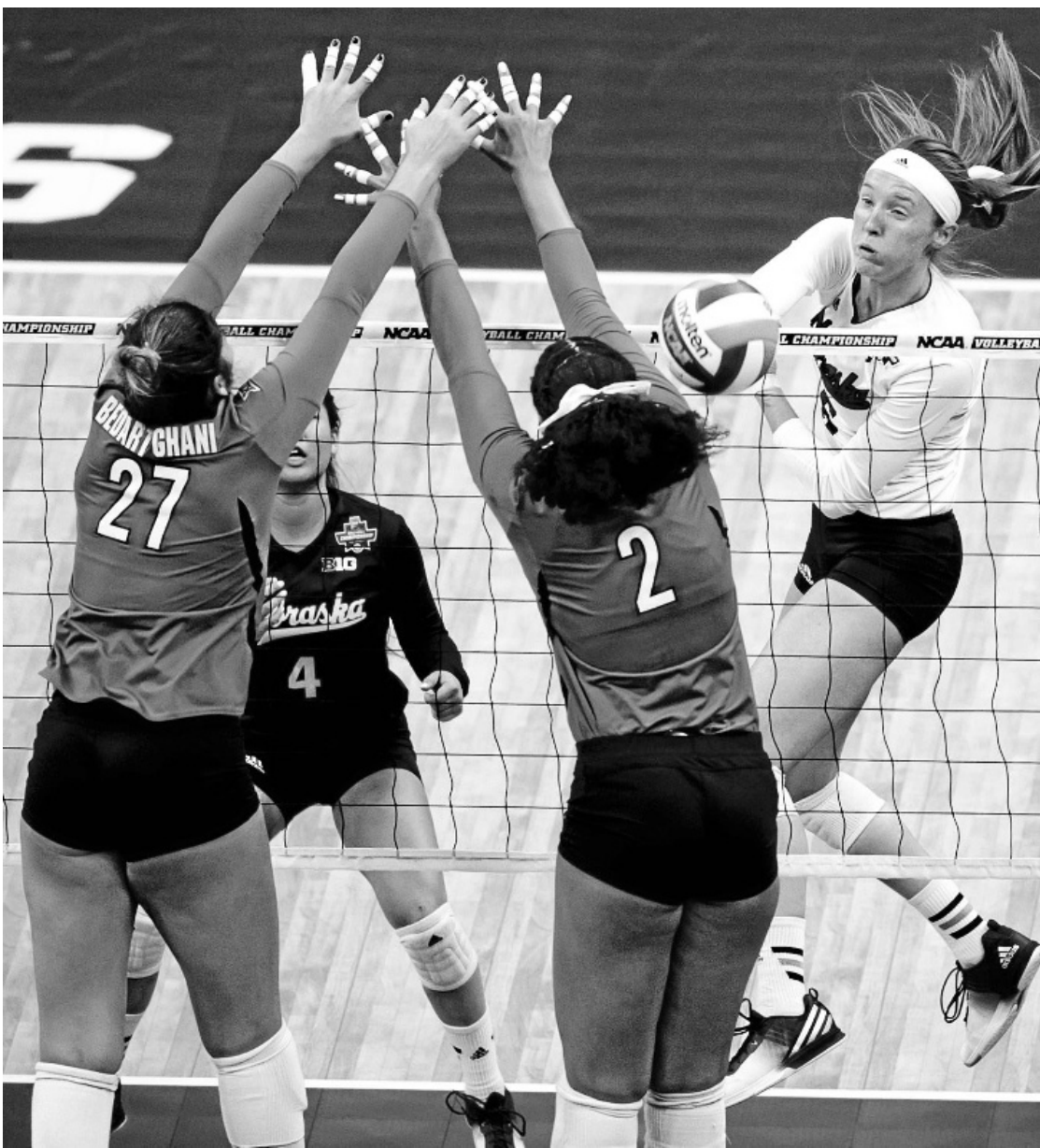
“They’re super loyal and active on social media,” Johnson-Lynch said. “I hope they go and we can live vicariously through them.”

How awestruck the former Huskers are at the enormity of Volleyball Day may depend on their specific experiences in Lincoln. Teams from the ‘80s would put a sign in front of the Coliseum after football games inviting crowds to show their ticket stubs and watch some volleyball. Matches typically attracted a few hundred.

“Grassroots at the time,” Schonewise said. “Trying to draw people in any way we could.”

The gold standard then was the 1986 title match against Pacific, held on Pacific’s campus, that drew a standing room-only throng of 6,500. Nebraska in the early ’90s cracked 11,000 multiple times for standalone contests at Devaney. The Huskers played before 17,209 at the CHI Health Center in Omaha when it beat Stanford for the 2006 national title.

The championship-winning NU match against Texas in 2015



JOURNAL STAR FILE PHOTO

Nebraska’s Kadie Rolfzen (6) sends the ball past Texas’ Yaazie Bedart-Ghani (27) and Ebony Nwanebu (2) during an NCAA semifinal match in 2016 in Columbus, Ohio. Rolfzen, a four-time All-American, will be at Wednesday’s match inside Memorial Stadium, just her second match since graduating.

in Omaha set a record with 17,561 that remains a top-10 all-time crowd to see college volleyball. Kadie Rolfzen — a four-time All-America outside hitter and a junior on that squad — couldn’t have dreamed any bigger.

In hindsight, maybe she could have.

“I thought that was such a cool moment,” Rolfzen said. “To know that this is, what, five times the size of that? Part of me would have been so in awe of where I was playing and all the people that I feel like the first couple points of the game I would have been starting off to take in the moment. It would be so hard for me to focus.”

Rolfzen will be in the stadium Wednesday for her second NU match since graduating. Her twin sister, Amber, won’t be with her — Amber is a high school coach at a suburban Chicago school and can’t get away. Kadie retired from pro ball in 2020 and is helping coach this season at Lincoln Lutheran.

A football-style Tunnel Walk would have been something, Rolfzen said. She got used to full houses at Devaney, but an event like this would have been borderline overwhelming.

“I’m excited,” Rolfzen said. “Also I’m a little jealous — I wish I was there playing and able to experience it on the court.”

Said former setter Kelly Hunter (2013-17), now an NU assistant coach: “I can’t even put into words what I’m going to be feeling. I tried to the other day and I was just a little bit emotional picturing running out onto the field in front of 95,000.”

Metcalf, who participated in the 2004 Olympics and played all over the world, said Wednesday’s environment will be entirely unique in size and scope. Players will probably make mistakes they normally wouldn’t because of sheer nerves.

Depth perception might be the biggest challenge. Typically hitters use crowds as a focus point when tracking the ball, Metcalf said, but people are much farther away on a football field. Look up to the sky and there’s no reference point at all, which makes any beach training helpful.

“It gives me goosebumps thinking about it,” Metcalf said. “I can’t imagine how excited the players are to have a chance to do that.”

Johnson-Lynch said the event has been the buzz of the volleyball community well beyond the Nebraska borders. Her own team talks about it, and Iowa State has been a top-15 NCAA program by attendance, regularly averaging around 3,000 people.

What might volleyball in a

football stadium do for the sport? For women’s sports in general? What might it do to win over casual fans? A number in excess of 90,000 stretches the imagination like a net violation.

“That’s just a whole other level of legitimacy,” Johnson-Lynch said. “That’s what I would feel as a player is we’re not just another program but we’re special because 80,000 people want to come see us play. I don’t know what I’d feel — I think I’d feel pretty nervous and special and honored to have that opportunity.”

Schonewise, a longtime youth coach in Omaha, smiles through the phone thinking of players she worked with — now at Omaha and Wayne State — who will compete on a Taraflex court inside a historic 100-year-old football stadium on national television. What a difference 37 years makes.

These women will look into the stands knowing they are the main event. With maybe a little extra volume coming from Section 1.

“Hard to imagine back then,”

Schonewise said. “We were playing in the Coliseum and setting up chairs before matches, begging people to stop after the football game to watch us play. To be able to play in front of that kind of crowd would just be phenomenal. It’s so fun — if anyone can pull it off, it’s Nebraska.”

Volleyball

From C3

Beason had family on the mind this summer when she figured this match will be something to tell her future children about.

“I think the one thing I’ve thought about the whole time is we’re making history,” the junior from Gardendale, Alabama, said. “And when you think about history, one day my daughter can watch the documentary that the Big Ten Network is making and she’ll be like, ‘Oh, there’s Mom.’ That’s such a cool thing to think about. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.”

The match could also have

record viewership on TV on Big Ten Network. A college volleyball match in a football stadium is certainly unique, and viewers will give it a chance, just like a Major League Baseball game at the “Field of Dreams” movie site in Iowa or the outdoor hockey games in Omaha in 2013.

Construction began at the stadium on Thursday. Nebraska coach John Cook got his first close look at everything on Monday, and that’s when he said it felt like this was really happening.

“I’m like, ‘This is as close as I’m going to be to being the head football coach at Nebraska playing down here,’” Cook said. “This is going to be awesome.”

It will be interesting to see what the match looks and sounds like. After the Tunnel Walk, and the first 10 points of the match, what will the match be like? Will the crowd be subdued, like the second half of a football spring game?

Maybe Husker freshman middle blocker Andi Jackson can smash down some kills on the slide attack and light up the stadium.

At Nebraska matches where there is a really long rally with great defensive plays from both teams, the fans applaud the effort, even if the Huskers lose the point. Does that follow the team to Memorial Stadium?

Last winter Cook didn’t know

if they should try a stadium match. It was a risk. What would the weather be like? Would the stadium feel empty?

Now Cook is glad they went for it.

“It was a huge risk,” Cook said. “Could we set up a stage? How could we do that? When we originally talked about it, it was like, ‘We’ll just put the (court) on the field.’ Well, there is a 9-inch hump in the middle of the field. You can’t play volleyball going downhill.

“So there was a lot that’s gone into this.”

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PREP VOLLEYBALL

Southwest tops two rated teams

Pius X enjoys thrilling win at loaded triangular

NOAH DOUGLAS
Lincoln Journal Star

Lincoln Southwest emerged unscathed from a battle of three ranked teams, hosted by the Silver Hawks on Tuesday.

Class A No. 4 Southwest defeated both No. 7 Millard North and No. 8 Lincoln Pius X in straight sets — 25-17, 25-12 and 25-13, 25-18, respectively.

The Silver Hawks’ key to success was the chemistry they showed. Head coach Jessica Kirkendall described it as “a group of girls just having the time of their lives.”

Coming off a disappointing loss to Norfolk to start the year, Coach Kirkendall was excited to see how her girls rebounded and fought Tuesday.

“I feel like today is a better look at our team,” Kirkendall said. “We came out a little tense against Norfolk and it was good to see we came out a little stronger and came out together as more of a team.”

The difference-maker tonight was sustained intensity throughout the match.

“We talked about not getting into a lull and we relaxed in Set 2 allowing them to get on a bit of a run,” Kirkendall said. “But they are already like, ‘OK, next we’ve got Kearney (on Thursday),’ and now we take it one day at a time.”

While the Silver Hawks enjoyed the offensive dominance of junior Shelby Harding and senior Maddie Rink, Malayah Long’s leadership was also vital in the victory-filled night.

Kirkendall said Long’s leadership pays dividends for the team’s success.

“Malayah is one of our girls that everyone looks up to,” Kirkendall said.

The coach also emphasized Long’s infectious smile as being a key to the team mindset as well.

While the Silver Hawks ended the night on a win, Pius X enjoyed the thrill of an exciting win against Millard North (22-25, 25-17, 28-30).

In a decisive Set 3 that was tied 11 times, the grit and determination the Thunderbolts had exemplified what this team brings to the table, even early in the season. In fact, it was Pius X’s first match.

“Tonight was our first game of the season and we are also young, but it was good to see our very, very good strengths,” Bolts coach Katie Wenz said. “We have the potential to be a great team, too.”

The maturity displayed in defeat Tuesday impressed Wenz.

“In the locker room, they didn’t pass the blame,” Wenz said. “They all took ownership, we will learn from it and now we are moving on to Thursday. It is huge for high school kids to do. I’m proud of them.”

PREP GLANCE

East claws out comeback win in intracity clash

The Lincoln East volleyball team won an intense fourth set, and then rolled in the fifth to beat Lincoln Southeast 3-2.

Southeast led 2-1 after winning the first set 25-20 and the third 25-20.

The Spartans clawed out a 28-26 win in the fourth to extend the match, and then used that momentum to roll to a 15-4 win.

Lincoln North Star 3, Lincoln High 0: Macy Roth led the Gators with 10 kills and nine digs, while Alex Kroll added three ace serves in a 25-13, 25-9, 25-7 sweep.

SOFTBALL

Lincoln East 15, Lincoln Northeast 4: Madison Adams had three hits (two doubles and a home run) to lead the No. 2 Spartans past Lincoln Northeast.

Lincoln Pius X 6-9, Lincoln Southeast 3-0: Sydney Menenga had two hits and three RBIs combined and also threw a complete-game shutout in the night-cap.

GIRLS GOLF

Waverly Invite: Lincoln Lutheran finished fourth as a team at the Waverly Invite with 434 strokes. Lincoln Christian’s Olivia Lovegrove won individual honors with a 71. Bailey Schmidt shot a 90 for Lincoln Lutheran to finish sixth.

GOLF

Johnson makes familiar Ryder Cup picks

DOUG FERGUSON
Associated Press

U.S. captain Zach Johnson wasn’t about to go to Rome for the Ryder Cup without Justin Thomas. And he made it sound as though Brooks Koepka was just as easy a decision.

They were among six captain’s picks announced Tuesday to fill out a 12-man American team that will try to end three decades of losing on European soil, all while setting up Johnson for the usual dose of second-guessing if it all goes wrong.

The Ryder Cup is Sept. 29 to Oct. 1 at Marco Simone outside Rome. Europe’s team will not be determined until after this

week.

Thomas is regarded by players on both sides as the emotional spark for the U.S. team in the Ryder Cup, beyond his 6-2-1 record in two previous appearances. But he has gone 15 months without winning, and he played so poorly this year that he didn’t even finish among the top 70 who reached the FedEx Cup postseason.

“He has without question been the heart and soul of Team USA,” Johnson said. “In my mind, he was born for this. You just don’t leave JT at home.”

Koepka was knocked out of the six automatic qualifiers in the final week. No one would

have thought twice about his selection as the PGA Championship winner and a Masters runner-up, except that he’s part of Saudi-backed LIV Golf and its 54-hole events and 48-man fields.

Turns out that wasn’t an issue. “It was a pretty easy pick,” Johnson said.

“He’s built in my mind for the biggest of stages, and there’s no bigger stage than the Ryder Cup,” Johnson said from the PGA of America’s new headquarters in Frisco, Texas.

The other four picks were Jordan Spieth and Collin Morikawa, both part of the U.S. rout over Europe in 2021 at Whistling

Straits, along with Rickie Fowler and Sam Burns, the only Ryder Cup rookie among the six picks.

The six qualifiers were Scottie Scheffler, U.S. Open champion Wyndham Clark, British Open champion Brian Harman, Patrick Cantlay, Max Homa and Xander Schauffele.

Left off the team were Cameron Young, who has finished in the top 10 in four of the last seven majors and was No. 9 in the Ryder Cup standings; Keegan Bradley (No. 11), a two-time winner this season who has played in two Ryder Cups; and Lucas Glover, one of the hottest players in golf with two victories over the last four weeks.